Norman Mark

Three new hands improve on their jobs

All the world watches when someone botches a broadcast.

Then everyone — relatives, bosses, columnists, elevator operators, panhandlers, disk jockeys and aldermen — give advice to the star: Comb your hair differently, buy a new suit, lower your voice, be happier, get plastic surgery, lose weight, go back to Des Moines, etc.

Three men in Chicago recently found new jobs in broadcasting. Each was supposed to erase the memory of his predecessors and win new audiences. Each blundered in the first few weeks on the job, but each has since recovered.

This probably means they are adept at not listening to advice.

BEFORE Bob McBride was hired in October by Channel 2 (WBBM) as its 10 p.m. anchorman, WBBM had been through so many changes that the news could have been introduced with, "Here is the Channel 2 news with what's-his-name."

McBride was advertised as the prettiest reporter in town, a campaign which made his first weeks eventful but unhappy.

Bob McBride

Channel 2 tried to imitate Channel 7's happy comrades approach, only the WBBM newsmen seldom listened to each other. A straight line would sail softly out of the ether, only to be ignored as each man concentrated on the stories he was about to read.

In recent days, however, Channel 2 has started to pull together. The station management realized that McBride isn't the Bob Hope of Chicago (much less the new Joel Daly). He is a competent, attractive reader of news, and around those qualities there might be a successful operation.

It is also possible that Channel 2 looked at the ratings. According to the Nielsen statistics, at 10 p.m. Channels 7 and 9 keep about the same share of the audience they had at 9:30, while Channel 2's popularity plunges and Channel 5's soars at 10.

Thus, it looks as if thousands of Chicagoans switch from Channel 2 to Channel 5 at 10 p.m. If McBride wants them to stay with him, therefore, he'll probably have to resemble Floyd Kalber, WMAQ's top-rated anchorman.

If McBride is successful, Channel 5 may lose some viewers and Channel 7, which has long pressed WMAQ for the top ratings, will be in undisputed first place at 10 p.m.

WHEN BILL BERG took over the 4-7 p.m. slot at WGN-AM this August after Howard Miller had left the station, Berg moved to the great wishy-washy middle as an alternative to Miller's conservatism. Berg reflected many sides of most issues, sometimes all at once.

He said, "On the other hand . . ." so often that sometimes a listener could almost believe Berg's mother had been a multi-armed goddess of India.

But recently, Berg has been more sure of himself. Three nights ago he refused to admit to a caller that his show was sex oriented, and he stoutly maintained that his program will not be limited to what is acceptable to eight-year-olds.

That isn't as outspoken as calling for one side or the other to take over Ireland, but it is a firm stand, one of a number Berg recently has taken.

WHEN BOB KENNEDY took over WLS-TV's midnight talk show last month, he too was reacting to Howard Miller's former presence. (Much of Chicago broadcasting, it seems, is reacting in one way or another to Miller.)

His crew decided that a lighter touch was needed. So Kennedy imitated a chimpanzee, bounced on a water bed with Debbie Drake, and entertained guests who weren't worth a two-minute recorded telephone message, let along an appearance on a TV show.

It took a while for Kennedy and his staff to realize that a nighttime show was different from Kennedy & Co., Channel 7's energetic 7 a.m. effort, which also has Kennedy as its host.

During the last few days, Kennedy has brought some depth to his interviews and he has relaxed. The quality of the guests (with some notable exceptions) has improved.

KENNEDY, Berg and McBride still have problems with their shows.

McBride should be more comfortable and fatherly. Berg presides over a program too cluttered with miscellaneous reports, he should call more people who have interesting information (rather than waiting for anonymous callers to come to him). And Kennedy's set is atrocious and the program needs better pacing.

But all three men are improving their products almost every day. That's more than you can say about a lot of things in this world.

CHANNEL 11 (PBS) went to Rolling Meadows Wednesday night for a profile of Richard and Mary Ann Johnson, who represented the middle class on an Election '72 report. The documentary seemed accurate and informative.

But after the show, Mrs. Johnson told me that she was surprised to learn that her daughter hated peanut butter (as revealed on the program), wasn't angry that her age (36) was revealed, and thought the program was pretty good.

The Johnsons were pictured as a family concerned about the expenses of a college education for their children, discouraged about politicians who offer more than they deliver, and struggling to make ends meet.

But Mrs. Johnson told me they were not as poverty-stricken as the program had indicated. Johnson's employer has a stock option program and the employer matches Johnson's contributions to it. Reporter Robert MacNeil didn't mention that.